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ABSTRACT

The difference between phrogfessors and teachers is that phrogfessors train tadpoles in the way of the swamp (i.e., create likenesses of themselves) while teachers produce people and thereby help to drain the swamp. Phrogfessors take responsibility for what their students learn. They believe that if a student does badly, it is the phrogfessor's fault. In this way, they deny their students' existence. The basic job of a phrogfessor is to be responsible for students and to care for oneself, while the basic job of a teacher is to be responsible for oneself and to care for the students. Teachers look for ways to connect people psychologically to important issues, are passionate and subjective, and don't feel that they are important to the learning process. It is the student who is responsible for the student's learning. Teachers do not become phrogfessors by design and, luckily, the process is reversible if the right choices are made. (DC)

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by Dr. Jerry B. Harvey

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ARE YOU PHROG FARMING OR HELPING TO DRAIN THE SWAMP

Some time ago I wrote an article entitled, "Organizations as Phrog Farms," the basic theme being that one of the primary purposes of formal organizations is to turn bright, creative, energetic people into impotent, sterile phrogs (Frog is spelled with a ph because frogs don't like to be known as frogs and try to hide their frogginess.) who take their places as fly-flickers in the Great Swamp of Life. As part of that article I suggested that the educational process in general and phrogfessors (PFs) in particular have major roles in training tadpoles in the ways of the swamp. As the reader might guess, the article created a fair amount of flapping among tadpole development specialists and swamp phrogistrators who felt that I had unfairly thrown mud on their lily pads. Many of them asked, "Is teaching necessarily a form of phrog farming or can it be a form of swamp drainage and area reclamation?"

At first I attempted to dismiss such cries from the swamp as examples of the language of ribbit or the atonal music of phrog choruses which, as you know, seldom sing in tune. However, the more I thought about it and the more frequently I noticed a little webbing between my toes, the more I felt their questions and complaints had merit. Consequently, I would like to discuss some ideas I have regarding the difference between phrogfessing and teaching, and how one produces tadpoles while the other produces people and, by doing so, drains the swamp.

Phrogfessors (hence shortened to PFs) take reponsibility for what their students learn. I know they take responsibility for students' learning because they allow boards of bullphrogs to hold them accountable for it. They ask colleagues and students to evaluate their teaching for purposes of promotion and tenure. They get depressed if students don't learn in their classes. They attend workshops on how to change their style of phrogfessing, under the assumption that their style, as opposed to their essence, is important to the process of learning. In fact, many of them have the maxim on their desks (or in their minds): "If the student hasn't learned, the PF hasn't taught." That maxim is quite peculiar because it clearly implies that the basic responsibility for learning belongs to the phrogfessor. Consequently, if the student does badly, the PF's at fault. But, following the same logic rigorously, if the student performs competently, the PF must get the credit. For all intents and purposes then, the student doesn't exist, except as a sort of phrog-like, passive receptacle for the PF's competence or incompetence. In short, if phrogfessors accept responsibility for their students' learning, they deny their students' existence and don't respect students very much, if at all. Likewise, if students permit PFs to accept responsibility for their learning, they don't respect themselves (or the PF) very much.

If you take seriously the proposition that you are not responsible for students' learning, then teachers are nearly forced to ask, "What am I responsible for? What do I get paid to do?" I wish I could say that I have developed a satisfactory answer to the question. Right now, this is the best I can do. A teacher's job is:

- To be technically competent--to know math, or biology, or English, or history.
- To care immensely for students and to like them, if at all possible.
- To design an environment where students can develop their abilities.
- To cheer students' successes and mourn their failures, but not to feel responsible for either.

In summary, the basic job of a phrogfessor is to be responsible for others and to care

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for oneself, while the basic job of a teacher is to be responsible for oneself and to care for (i.e., behave responsibly toward) the students she/he teaches.

Teachers look for ways to connect people psychologically on those issues which are important. For example, in my classes, I write my students a letter, part of which says: "You may take this examination alone or with as many other people as you like. I frown on cheating, though. I define cheating as the failure to assist another on this exam if she/he requests it." To my surprise, given the choice of working alone or working with others, most students opt to take the exam with at least one other person; and the results of their work are skewed very much in the direction of competence. Such a procedure has forced me to ask the question, "What does a grade mean?" The best I can tell is that it means nothing. I find that PFs are concerned about that, but teachers view the revelation with relief.

Phrogfessors attempt to treat others objectively. They give objective exams, try to present value-laden issues objectively, attempt to evaluate student performance objectively and, in general, try to withdraw their passion from the classroom. In short, PFs both deny and withhold the essence of their humanness from their students. As a result, they treat others as objects. And as R. D. Laing has pointed out, treating another objectively (i.e., as an object) is one sure way to drive him/her schizoid. Laing has also pointed out that if I treat you as an object I become an object myself. Perhaps the process of objectification underlies the frequent metamorphosis of teacher to phrogfessor to victim of the disease swampologists call "burnout."

Teachers, on the other hand, are passionate and subjective in the classroom. They treat students as subjects--not depersonalized objects. They give subjective examinations. They get angry. They are funny. Occasionally, they cry. By being passionate they are sometimes unfair, or blind, but are seldom unapproachable when they make the inevitable mistakes that go with such human enthusiasm. Though sometimes wrong, teachers are seldom uninteresting or uninterested.

Teachers don't feel they are that important to the learning process. Some of them feel as if they are nobody, but I think their feeling might be a perversion of the thought which occurs after existing for long periods of time surrounded by phrogs in the swamp. In my opinion, teachers become more important the less important they feel; and when they accept the fact that they are unimportant, they no longer are.

Perhaps Emily Dickinson inadvertently spoke for us all when she said:

I'm Nobody. Who are you?
Are you--Nobody--Too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell. They'd banish us--you know.

How dreary--to be--Somebody
How public--like a Frog
To tell one's name the livelong June--
To an admiring Bog.

Finally, I have never known a teacher to become a PF by design or by malicious intent. Rather the process of becoming a PF represents the end result of living long periods of time in phrog farms and of choosing to accept the ways of the swamp on issues involving responsibility, accountability, objectivity, competence, self-importance and individuality.

Luckily, though, the process is not irreversible. In fact, those choices can be remade and phrogfessors can choose to take responsibility for themselves and care for others; to treat students in ways which allow them to connect with one another in order to survive; to respond to others as subjects rather than objects; and to accept the fact that Nobodies are important. Through such a process teachers are born or, in some cases, reborn. The choices are not easy, though. Whichever choice you make, may you phrogfess or teach in peace.

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KAREN WATKINS, EDITOR
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